

LESSON ONE

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES ... FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.
(1 Timothy 4:7, NASB)

CENTRAL IDEA

The only road to Christian maturity and Godliness (Christlikeness and holiness) passes through the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines. These personal and corporate disciplines promote spiritual growth and have been practiced by God’s people since biblical times. Jesus modeled them for us and expects us to pursue them. In doing so, we will taste the joy of a Spiritually Disciplined lifestyle.

WARM-UP

1. Describe a time when you disciplined yourself in order to reach a specific goal, or when you did not discipline yourself and failed to reach a specific goal.

What Is the Purpose of Spiritual Disciplines?

“When it comes to discipline in the Christian life, many believers feel it’s discipline without direction. Prayer threatens to be drudgery. The practical value of meditation on Scripture seems uncertain. The real purpose of a Discipline like fasting is often unclear.

It is said of God’s elect in Romans 8:29, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” God’s eternal plan ensures that every Christian will ultimately conform to Christlikeness. We will be changed “when he appears” so that “we shall be like him” (1 John 3:2). This is no vision; this is *you*, Christian, in a few years.

So why all the talk about discipline? If God has predestined our conformity to Christlikeness, where does discipline fit in? Although God will grant Christlikeness to us when Jesus returns, until then He intends for us to grow toward that Christlikeness. We aren’t merely to wait for holiness; we’re to pursue it. “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy,” we’re commanded in Hebrews 12:14, for “without holiness no one will see the Lord.” This leads us to ask what every Christian should ask: “How then shall we pursue holiness? How can we be like Jesus Christ, the Son of God?” We find a clear answer in 1 Timothy 4:7—“Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (NASB).

The only road to Christian maturity and Godliness (a biblical term synonymous with Christlikeness and holiness) passes through the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines. Godliness is the goal of the Disciplines, and when we remember this, the Spiritual Disciplines become a delight instead of drudgery.

God Commands Us to Be Holy

The original language of the words “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” makes it plain that this is a command of God, not merely a suggestion. Holiness is not an option for those who claim to be children of the Holy One (1 Peter 1:15–16), so neither are the means of holiness, that is, the Spiritual Disciplines, an option.

The expectation of disciplined spirituality is implied in Jesus’ offer of Matthew 11:29—“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.” The same is true in this offer of discipleship: “Then he said to them all, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me’ ” (Luke 9:23). These verses tell us that to be a disciple of Jesus means, at the very least, to learn from and follow Him. Learning and following involve discipline, for those who only learn accidentally and follow incidentally are not true disciples. That discipline is at the heart of discipleship is confirmed by Galatians 5:22–23, which says that spiritual self-discipline (i.e., “self-control”) is one of the most evident marks of being Spirit-controlled.

The Lord Jesus not only expects these Disciplines of us—He modeled them for us.

What Are the Spiritual Disciplines?

The Spiritual Disciplines are those personal and corporate disciplines that promote spiritual growth. They are the habits of devotion and experiential Christianity that have been practiced by the people of God since biblical times.

Whatever the Discipline, its most important feature is its purpose. Just as there is little value in practicing the scales on a guitar or piano apart from the purpose of playing music, there is little value in practicing Spiritual Disciplines apart from the single purpose that unites them (Colossians 2:20–23, 1 Timothy 4:8). That purpose is Godliness. Thus we are told in 1 Timothy 4:7 to discipline ourselves “*for the purpose of godliness*” (emphasis added).

On the one hand, we recognize that even the most iron-willed self-discipline will not make us more holy, for growth in holiness is a gift from God (John 7:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 2:11). On the other hand, we can do something to further the process. God has given us the Spiritual Disciplines as a means of receiving His grace and growing in Godliness. By them we place ourselves before God for Him to work in us.

The Spiritual Disciplines are also like channels of God’s transforming grace. As we place ourselves in them to seek communion with Christ, His grace flows to us and we are changed. That’s why the Disciplines must become a priority for us if we will be Godly.

The Fruit of Spiritual Disciplines

We must remember that the full-grown freedoms of discipline-nurtured Godliness don’t develop overnight or during a weekend seminar. The Bible reminds us that self-control, such as that expressed through the Spiritual Disciplines, must persevere before the mature fruit of Godliness ripens. Notice the sequence of development in 2 Peter 1:6—“and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness.” Godliness is a lifelong pursuit.

If your picture of a disciplined Christian is one of a grim, tight-lipped, joyless half-robot, then you've missed the point. Jesus was the most disciplined Man who ever lived and yet the most joyful and passionately alive. He is our example of discipline. Let us follow Him to joy through the Spiritual Disciplines. (*Taken from chapter 1 of Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life.*)

Persevering in the Practice of the Spiritual Disciplines

Three things, when understood, will help you persevere in the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines: the role of the Holy Spirit, the role of fellowship, and the role of struggle in Christian living.

The Holy Spirit. The role of the Holy Spirit is to produce within us the desire and the power for the Disciplines that lead to Godliness. That He develops this in every believer is evident from 2 Timothy 1:7.

The Bible doesn't explain the mechanics of the mystery of the Spirit's ministry to us. But these two things are clear: (1) He will be ever faithful to help each of God's elect to persevere to the end in those things which will make us like Christ, and (2) we must not harden our hearts, but instead respond to His promptings if we would be Godly.

Fellowship. No one should read of the Spiritual Disciplines and imagine that by practicing them in isolation from other believers they can be just as Christlike, perhaps even more so, than Christians who are active members of a local body of Christ. To measure progress in Christlikeness only in terms of growth in fellowship with God is an incomplete measurement. Spiritual maturity also includes growth in fellowship with the children of God.

Struggle. There is an element of struggle in Christian living. Many forces combat the spiritual progress of those still on this side of Heaven. Practicing the Spiritual Disciplines and progressing in Godliness will be accompanied by struggle. The victory that we actually experience over the forces opposing our progress in the Disciplines will come *through the practice of the Disciplines.* (*Taken from chapter 13 of Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life.*)”

Pondering Spiritual Disciplines

2. In the past, how have you felt about Spiritual Disciplines such as Bible intake, prayer, worship, evangelism, and fasting? Be honest.
3. What single purpose unites the Spiritual Disciplines? (Colossians 2:20–23, 1 Timothy 4:8)

The Importance of Holiness (Godliness)

4. What does 1 Peter 1:15–16 say about the importance of holiness in believers' lives?
5. Describe a Godly person you know who has reached spiritual maturity through discipline. Which practical Spiritual Disciplines has he or she practiced regularly?

Catalysts That God Uses to Make Us More Christlike

6. *People.* Often God brings people into our lives whose input leads us to become more Christlike. Read Proverbs 27:17. Describe a time when God used someone to file away your rough, ungodly edges.

7. a. *Circumstances*. We've all faced trying circumstances that God uses to make us more like Himself. What does Romans 8:28 say about our difficult circumstances?
 - b. As a group, discuss how God uses circumstances in life to move you closer toward Godliness.

8. *Spiritual Disciplines*. Rather than externally coming from people and/or circumstances, this catalyst works from the inside of our lives and goes outward. Also, God grants us more choice regarding our involvement with this catalyst than with people or circumstances. Describe a time when God used your prayer time or Bible meditation to change you from the inside out.

Spiritual Disciplines:

A Way to Seek God and Know Him Better

Today people place great emphasis on physical exercise as a means of staying healthy. Spiritual Disciplines are similar to physical exercise, in that when we exercise ourselves spiritually we promote Godliness in our lives.

Let's look at two Bible stories that reveal how two people put themselves in the path of Jesus and sought Him. As a result, their lives were forever changed.

9. *Bartimaeus*: Luke 18:35–43
 - a. What strikes you about his response to Jesus?

 - b. In response to Bartimaeus' faith, what did Jesus do for him?

10. *Zacchaeus*: Luke 19:1–10
 - a. How did this tax collector pursue Jesus?

 - b. What does this story tell us about Jesus' mercy?

11. How do these stories encourage you to seek God?

The Spiritual Disciplines Are Like Channels of God's Transforming Grace

12. According to the text, as we place ourselves in the Spiritual Disciplines in order to seek communion with God, "His grace flows to us and we are changed." Describe a time when you sought God and His grace flowed into you and changed you.

The Lord Expects Us to Pursue the Spiritual Disciplines

13. What do the following verses say about what it means for each of us to be Jesus' disciple?

Matthew 11:29

Luke 9:23

The Consequences of Being Spiritually Undisciplined

14. Why do people who will discipline themselves for years to become proficient at their careers or recreational sports quickly stop pursuing the Spiritual Disciplines? Has this happened to you?
15. “The gold of Godliness isn’t found on the surface of Christianity,” states the text. “It has to be dug from the depths with the tools of the Disciplines.” Think back on your activities last week. Were you able to use the tools of the Disciplines to dig for the “gold of Godliness”? If yes, what steps will you take to maintain your discipline? If not, what steps can you take to practice Spiritual Discipline this week?

Spiritual Disciplines Bring Freedom

16. a. “Freedom comes through mastery of any discipline.... The freedom of Godliness is the freedom to do what God calls us to do through Scripture and the freedom to express the character qualities of Christ through our own personality.” In which areas of life have you experienced this freedom?
 - b. If you haven’t experienced this freedom, what steps will you take to bring yourself closer to this freedom?

Spiritual Disciplines Take Time

17. Read 2 Peter 1:3–6. Why must self-control persevere before the mature fruit of Godliness ripens?

God Invites All Christians to Enjoy the Spiritual Disciplines

18. When we practice the Spiritual Disciplines with the goal of Godliness in mind, our discipline has direction. Jesus is our example of discipline. Look up these verses: Matthew 4:2; Luke 2:46–47; John 13:2–6, 17:4. What does each say about Jesus and His pursuit of the Spiritual Disciplines?

Persevering in the Practice of the Christian Disciplines

19. Through the Holy Spirit, we have the power to persevere in the Spiritual Disciplines. Read 2 Timothy 1:7 and then describe why this truth should encourage us.

CLOSING PRAYER

Focus on God's deep love for you and on His desire to communicate with you through the Spiritual Disciplines. Ask the Lord to help you become willing to practice these Disciplines during the coming weeks of this study.

GOING DEEPER

(Extra questions for further study)

20. These days "denying oneself" is not a popular viewpoint. How does what Jesus said in Luke 9:23 relate to the practice of the Spiritual Disciplines?
21. Why is self-control one of the most evident marks of being Spirit-controlled? (See Galatians 5:22–23.)
22. What do you think the text means by, "The Spiritual Disciplines ... are also like channels of God's transforming grace"?
23. According to 1 Corinthians 12:4–7, everyone has been given spiritual gifts. Why do you think Spiritual Discipline is so important in the development of these gifts?
24. What practical steps are you willing to take this coming week to begin building more Spiritual Discipline into your life?